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DE RUEHMO #2428/01 2281136
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 151136Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9526
INFO RUEHSI/AMEMBASSY TBILISI PRIORITY 3883
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002428

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PBTS](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PNAT](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: TFGG01: Russian media declares war over - now what?

REF: A)MOSCOW 2343, B)MOSCOW 2366, C)MOSCOW 2383 D) MOSCOW 2407

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Russian media decreased its coverage of the South Ossetian conflict, shifting the focus to a post-game analysis of the war. Many media reports examined the future of U.S.-Russian relations after the conflict, responding to statements by President Bush and other senior USG officials. Several outlets have opined that Europe may prove to be a more sympathetic partner to Moscow than Washington. The print press offered a wider, more balanced view of the conflict, including limited criticism of specific Russian actions (while remaining convinced that Russia acted correctly.) Other outlets speculated on the futures of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and Georgian president Saakashvili. End Summary.

A defeat for Washington?

¶2. (SBU) Most Russian media continued to portray the conflict in South Ossetia and Georgia as one between Washington and Moscow, with Moscow winning this round, although President Bush's statement on sending a humanitarian mission to the region was interpreted as a means of supporting Saakashvili rather than to alleviate human suffering. Many news outlets saw a chillier relationship between the U.S. and Russia in the immediate future. Statements by SecDef Gates and Secretary Rice received much play, although some newspapers (such as Gazeta, a liberal paper) did note the U.S. emphasis against another cold war. Channel One, a state-owned broadcaster, ignored such nuances and declared that a "diplomatic war" was in effect between Washington and Moscow.

¶3. (SBU) Broadcast news and print emphasized President Medvedev's role as commander-in-chief, featuring him in the Kremlin meeting with generals and other high-ranking military officers, and announced that he had signed a decree authorizing the awarding of medals for combat during the conflict.

A place for Europe?

¶4. (SBU) In light of this perceived standoff between the U.S. and Russia, Russian media looked to Europe as a possible ally in this "diplomatic war." Nezavisimaya Gazeta, a centrist newspaper, predicted increased influence for France as a result of French President Sarkozy's mediation efforts and dismissed any threat to Russia within the EU from the "Tbilisi quartet" (Poland and the Baltic States.) Reporting of the meeting between Russian President Medvedev and German Chancellor Merkel, the pro-Kremlin newspaper Izvestiya declared Russia to have more "solid and predictable" relations with Europe than the U.S. Mikhail Leontyev, a popular anti-American television political pundit, saw Turkey as NATO's "weakest link" and felt the South Ossetian conflict might be a way of prying Ankara away from Washington's influence.

More balanced coverage all around, but critiques only
in print

15. (SBU) Nezavisimaya Gazeta ran an op-ed piece criticizing the Russian military for using out of date equipment and tactics from the Cold War, unsuited for current warfare. Gazeta also ran an article critical of Russian military performance in the Caucasus. Vedomosti, an independent paper, went even further and said the war was fought for the benefit of Russian state energy monopolies. It said Russian foreign policy "smacks of cynicism and double standards" when it calls for Saakashvili to go on trial for war crimes but uses criminal methods in Chechnya. However, such commentary is found only in print media, not/not on television. The coverage, however, did not question Russia's fundamental right to intervene in Georgia, and simply looked critically at aspects of the operation and policy.

Future of the region and Saakashvili?

16. (SBU) The meeting between the leaders of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and President Medvedev headlined news reports and topped the news hours, showing images of the Kremlin warmly receiving the leaders of the two break-away republics,. . Both Izvestiya and Nezavisimaya Gazeta noted that Russia would support any decision made by these republics regarding their future status but within the framework of international law. Izvestiya made clear that "... it's too early to draw a new map of the Caucasus. Medvedev (although indirectly) has made it understood: that unlike the Western partners (in Kosovo), Russia will act according to the law."

17. (SBU) The frenzied attacks on Saakashvili and slowed down, but a unanimous consensus on his criminality, his status as an American puppet, and the level of destruction the people of South Ossetia suffered at his hands remained. Media continued to run stories on

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the South Ossetian victims of the conflict, with South Ossetian leader Kokoyty declaring on Channel One and Rossiya TV that "genocide" was committed against the Ossetian people.